

## Aboriginal Tourism Warming Up the 2000 Season

*By Beverley O'Neil, Ktunaxa Nation*

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We are at the dawn of the 2000 tourism season, and British Columbia is one of the leading tourism regions of Canada. The Aboriginal cultural tourism product is expected to grow in importance and the reason why is a growing world interest in cultural, educational, and experiential tourism. Yet despite all the wealth of experience offered by the Aboriginal cultural tourism product and the natural beauty of these lands, Canada has been hovering 10th in the world tourism industry.

Tourism is an export product yet there are few products in Canada and the Aboriginal community ready to be marketed internationally. Most tourism businesses may never be export ready, and they may not need to be in many aspects of their operation. According to Tourism BC's 2000 Tourism Outlook newsletter (January 2000) few of BC's overnight visitors are international. Almost 93 per cent of BC's overnight visitors originate from North America - of which 48 per cent are BC, 22 per cent are other Canada, and 23 per cent are United States including Mexico.

X̱a:ytem Longhouse Interpretive Centre, a jointly operated cultural educational tourism attraction located in Sto:lo traditional territory (of what is known today as Chilliwack and the Fraser Valley) is one of the First Nations' heritage products that knows they are not ready to welcome the international visitor... that is not yet. Opened in 1993 after this 9000-year old Stl'Atl'Imx ancient site was almost destroyed in 1991, the centre welcomes 14,000 visitors per year of which 11,000 are school children. The Centre is small and almost at full capacity now, to accommodate an international market would mean the Centre's would have to grow in all areas - size, operations, and cultural interpretation. **Linnea Battel** the Centre's Director has been working on the expansion and fundraising campaign to add more longhouses and some pit houses to the Centre. Although \$400,000 has been raised to date, it is a few

hundred thousand shy of the target. In February 2000 Linnea Battel (X̱a:ytem's Director) was awarded the BC Heritage Award in February 2000 by the **BC Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture** for her contribution to "preserving and promoting BC heritage in the community and province".

Other ventures such as the K'san Interpretive Village near Hazelton in Northern BC, and the Khowutzun Native Village in Duncan on Vancouver Island, have both successfully attracted international markets. They've done this by - changing the way they operate; training staff on customer service skills and cross-cultural knowledge; preparing pricing at least a year in advance of the season; operating year round; preparing promotional materials in languages other than English and French (i.e. Germany, Japanese, Chinese); regularly researching their markets including encouraging visitor comments; and, being able to respond to inquiries year round.

Although the International marketplace can seem attractive to the Aboriginal business and community, the costs to enter it are high, and the rewards don't happen overnight. Attending a European tourism tradeshow or marketplace can cost the operator in the neighbourhood of \$10,000 a year... and expect to pay that for at least three-years before a measurable amount of traffic begins. Keep in mind that operators from around the world attend these European tradeshows - each one trying to attract the tour operators and visitors to their destination. The Aboriginal products that exist in Canada compete head-on with indigenous cultural products around the world - it is not a closed environment. The most prominent competitors are the Native Americans in the United States, Maories in New Zealand, and Aboriginees in Australia and South Africa. The International tourist does not distinguish the difference between an indigenous person in New Zealand or North American, let alone a Haida from a

Tlinget. Nor are they familiar with the more prominently used terms in Canada for Aboriginal people such as First Nation. Often foreigners will use the terms Native, Indian, and Red Indian because these are the phrases they are most familiar with.

For most BC Aboriginal cultural tourism businesses, the best market is what I like to call the “We didn’t even know they liked us market”, or the BC and Canadian tourists. These people are familiar with the differences of First Nations; speak English (which most First Nation communities do); there are no currency differences so exchange rates are not needed; and are knowledgeable about the basics of travelling in Canada. In addition, most of the Aboriginal cultural tourism experiences can only

be accessed by ground, and this is the favored mode of transportation of the Canadian tourist (air travel is often too costly to get to these communities).

It is anticipated the BC resident overnight market will grow by 2.5 per cent, Other Canada 3.3 percent, and the United States by 4.8 per cent while Overseas will be only 3.1 per cent. This market growth will be shared by the BC mainstream tourism industry and of course, the existing known Aboriginal tourism business. Achieving these rates as well as continued growth in the future will depend on our ability to continue to offer quality product that satisfies and exceeds consumer expectations, and is more attractive than what is offered in other parts of Canada as well as the world.

***Beverley O’Neil** is a citizen of the Ktunaxa Nation, President of **O’Neil Marketing & Consulting** and **Numa Communications Ltd.**, as well as a freelance writer. Please contact her for permission to reprint or use the article for publication. Also, feel free to send her your comments and suggestions.  
Email: [info@designingnations.com](mailto:info@designingnations.com) Tel. (604) 913.1905.*